Missing: Paint Stains and Paper Cranes

The case of visual arts in village schools of Sukma

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The inexistence of arts class

Come to Sukma, a district in south Chhattisgarh, walk into any government school and find the time-table. Try to locate the word 'ART'. Chances are that you won't find it. And, luckily, if you do, try to quantitatively compare with the number of times Mathematics, English, Hindi, Science or Social science appears on it. I am sure the comparison will illustrate the lamentable state of arts as a subject in schools. And I am convinced, as a student of the Indian education system and as a teacher in the same, the situation would not be different elsewhere in the country, excluding a few exceptions.

In Sukma, I often hear the government officials and teachers saying that it is very difficult to reach many villages due to the rough terrains and violent socio-political history, nevertheless, I find that nothing stops the hierarchies embedded in formal education from entering the schools in those hard-to-reach villages. In the last 7 years of living and teaching in many different schools in Sukma, ranging from the massive residential schools that hosts around 500 children to small village-level primary, middle and high schools, never have I ever found an arts class.

It is crucial to acknowledge the severity of arts being absent from the classrooms, where children spend at least 6 important hours of their waking lives daily, in order to understand the contradiction between the kind of opportunities (as theorized by developmental psychologists) a child needs to learn, develop skills and attitudes, and what our classrooms actually offer (as I have observed in my limited experience). It would be unfair and irresponsible not to mention the names of researchers from who I am going to borrow certain words and findings, and count only on observations I've made of small children. Yet, I recount that children are highly curious and playful with their social and natural environments. They are explorative and investigative in approach, constantly building things (and toys-see P3 and P4), developing projects (see P1and P2), engaging with the material deeply, expressing their learning and using their hands and bodies to grasp and make sense of the world and perhaps, at times, just to have fun. Does the space between four walls of the classroom provide children the apparatuses to learn in the way children learn the best?

. *P1 and P2. Brothers, trying to make a long canal system on a rainy day, village Borguda, Sukma*

P3. Kumma Madvi with his self-made bow and arrow, village Kodrikosum, Sukma

P4. Balveer Kashyap, playing with a toy his brother made for him, village Pujaripal, Sukma

It is heart-wrenching to notice the dire absence of art-mediums, art-materials and art-teachers in the village schools which are terribly underfunded both in terms of money and exposure. Children rarely get access to unruled paper, colours (in any form) and other resources that allows one to make art. Sometimes, they don't even have pencils. I have seen children grabbing every little chalk piece fallen on the floor and drawing on the blackboard or the floor because these are large spaces where large drawings can be made. Sadly, there are schools that prohibit children from using chalk and board in the absence of teachers. Materials such as clay and other things from nature and children's houses (see P5 and P6) are

available but using them to do art and making sure that children learn from the process of making art requires pedagogical understanding of how art making is educative.

P5. A toy made by small children, village Neelawaran, Sukma

P6. Vishnu Kartami made a fully operating truck using waste cardboard, village Kodrikosum, Sukma

Now I would like to take a strong position here and claim that arts offer opportunities to develop not just artistic and aesthetic senses and capabilities but also attitudes that we need outside of the realm of arts. Arts attends to the nature of learning like blocks fit into each other in a game of Tetris. And while I speak of learning this and developing that, one must not forget the joy that comes out of making art. Pure joy. I have seen it in the eyes of my children and felt it in my own heart.

What happens when we take visual arts to the classroom?

"*If I paint a wild horse, you might not see the horse…but surely you will see the wildness" – Pablo Picasso*

Allow me to limit my use of the word arts to only visual arts in this article piece and let me first break down some commonly held beliefs associated with art. Often believed as a hobby, visual arts is reduced to 'drawing' alone. If stretched, I've heard people refer to visual arts as 'drawing-painting', something that can be practiced as extracurricular and not a career-building pursuit. It is only for a select few to pursue arts seriously - only those who are 'miraculously gifted' to become an artist. A few educated parents stress the importance of visual arts as it helps their children make better diagrams in biology. Such notions need a sociological examination and only a radical change in people's perception might alter the state of arts education.

Here I share a few pieces from my personal notes to illuminate the process of making art in a classroom and perhaps to demonstrate how arts is deeply educative. I hope the readers get a glimpse of the holistic engagement an arts class offers to children in these vignettes.

Radha, drawing a bird, grade 4, Primary School Pakela, Sukma

"Radha (age 8) holds the pencil but hasn't started drawing yet. She deeply observes the black and white picture of a bird. The bird appears enormous, its wings stretched out. She notices the many shapes, hidden in the picture, that form the image of the bird. When she is convinced of her close observation, she starts drawing on the paper. Once the lines are done, she looks deeply again. She is looking at the patterns on the body of the bird, how the wings are curved, and seems like she is almost studying the anatomy of the bird. She also notices the lightness and darkness of the shades of grey as guided by the arts facilitator. She attempts to draw the shapes and patterns. Sometimes her face twitches in dissatisfaction. Maybe a line has gone wrong. She doesn't have an eraser so she thinks how this problem could be solved? She asks a friend and he helps her in overwriting the line with a darker line. When the drawing looks complete, she takes a deep breath." (notes 2019)

Hadma, Devnath and Dinesh (L to R) painting self-portraits, Porta Cabin Pakela, Sukma

"Dinesh Baghel (age 14) seems to be dissolved in the process of mixing and making new colours. He asks me, 'how many colours can be made?' I say 'as many as you wish.' He makes around 30 using 3 primary colours and white and is done for the day. Next day he starts painting his self-portrait. He observes himself using the selfie camera of a smartphone, notices the shape of his face, the length of his hair, the position of his eyes, nose and lips. He paints his face but is not satisfied with the colour. He tries to change it and then gets sad that he made it worse. He goes around and looks at how others are painting. He talks with others and observes their brush strokes and colour-making. He observes that many are non-representational paintings and are using colours very freely. He finds it alright that the colour of his face in the painting is not the same as the actual

colour of his face. In fact, he further risks creating a new colour for the face. He explores the paintbrush on another paper to make thin lines for eyebrows. He perseveres for more than one hour and then asks me to take a photo of him with his painting." (notes 2019)

Girls exploring oil pastels, Kanya Ashram, Bhelwapal,

"Hidme (name changed) (age 9) presses the oil pastel on both white and then the black paper. She investigates how the pastels behaves differently with different amount of pressure and on different papers. Exploring further, she learns that dark colours can totally cover light colours but the opposite is not possible. She scrapes colours off colours to make patterns. With a little guidance, she realizes that her fingers can spread the colours. She makes a yellow circle and spreads the rays using her finger. She spreads blue over the black paper and makes white stars above. She seems to have an image in her mind. After exploration, she comes to expression." (notes 2020)

"Rural spaces provide rich possibilities of observing nature. Me and my students often went outside the school to closely observe and draw. Today, each student picked a tree and observed its shape, colours and if there are any animals, birds or insects living on them and then drew it using just pencil and crayons. I wish we had other art mediums to explore, nonetheless, children were happy when they saw all the trees on paper together. One of the

Trees drawn by students of grade 9 (2019-20 batch), Porta Cabin Pakela, Sukma

students said, 'it's like we've drawn a forest.'" (notes 2019)

These examples show how the process of art-making is deeply explorative, engaging and expressive. The process allows for children to develop skills like close observation, attention

to detail, investigation, problem-solving, creative risk taking, collaboration, thinking of multiple solutions, etc. (Artsparks Foundation, n.d.) . Through my participation in a professional development program (EdSparks Collective), I had the opportunity to learn about a robust and new approach to art education. Besides learning skills, it made me see how confidence is instilled in children when they create something meaningful instead of sitting passively in the classroom, how it promotes creative risk-taking and unfetters them from the fear of failing.

Sangeeta, Primary School Pakela

Gayatri, Primary School Pakela

Radha, Primary School Pakela

On arts integration

Apart from a few enlightened exceptions, the recent surge of attention that arts education has received is in the forms of art integration. A group of art-educators advocate that the integration of arts with the non-arts subjects (the practice of using arts strategies to build skills and teach classroom subjects across different disciplines) will improve teaching-learning. Having found this idea useful, more and more teachers are subscribing to many strategies of integration of arts. This has resulted in researches that study the transfer from arts learning to other areas of cognition. Hetland et.al. in a qualitative, ethnographic study of "serious" visual arts classrooms write, *"Art students who become comfortable with making mistakes and being playful may be willing to take creative risks in other areas of the*

curriculum" (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan, 2013). My fellow educators have also been utilising visual arts instruction to improve reading and language skills among children. In their experience, arts integration helps children learn faster.

While practitioners' beliefs are to be respected one needs to study the extent of these large claims about the pedagogical significance of arts integration. In Burger and Winner's meta-analysis, they find no support for the claim that the visual arts enhance reading skills or even that reading integrated with visual arts works better than reading instruction alone (Burger & Winner, 2000). In my own experience of teaching arts to children in Sukma, I find that in addition to the value-addition that arts integration can do to learning langauge but children must experience arts education as a subject in itself.

Also, there seems to be a growing belief that art education will be useful in increasing workforce productivity. Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education writes in the report 'Reinvesting in Art Education', "*Education in the arts is more important than ever. In the global economy, creativity is essential. Today's workers need more than just skills and knowledge to be productive and innovative participants in the workforce*" (President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, 2011).

In contrast, the report 'Arts for Arts Sake? The impact of arts education' published by OECD' argues,

"If learning in the arts has "collateral benefits" in other areas, so much the better. However, we do not believe that the existence of arts education should be justified in terms of skills in other academic subjects: if one seeks first and foremost to develop skills in geometry, studying geometry – rather than music or dance – is always likely to be more effective. The primary justification of arts education should remain the intrinsic value of the arts and the related skills and important habits of mind that they develop. Ultimately, the impact of arts education on other non-arts skills and on innovation in the labour market should not be the primary justification for arts education in today's curricula." (Winner, Goldstein, & Vincent-Lancrin, 2013)

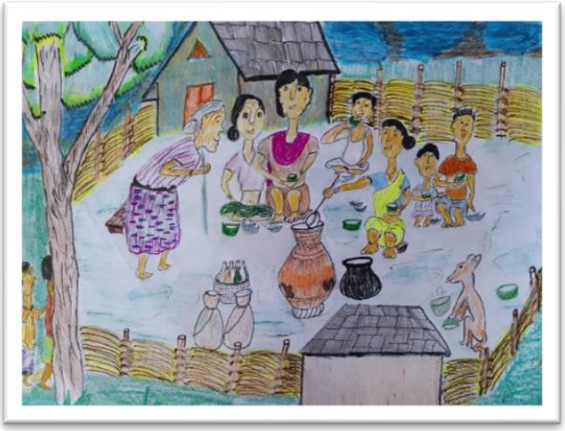
Keeping in mind the complexities and nature of different subjects, one has to be mindful in their use of pedagogies in the classroom. Blindly using arts as a decorative piece, as a catalyst in learning other subjects might only push arts down and maintain the hierarchy of subjects.

Visual arts as social justice

"Putting little white dots on blue-black is not enough to paint a starry sky" – Vincent Van Gogh

Visual arts give children a chance to engage deeply with materials and mediums and express in ways that are beyond words. In Sukma, the school language often fails to support the need to express. Writing is rarely taught as writing to express one's own ideas and experiences and thus, unless it is taken seriously, remains ill-developed and doesn't naturally take the form of art. If given freedom and the tools, children eagerly want to express about their lives, their communities, their festivals and practices, dreams and fantasies.

Sukma is the *bhum* (earth) of *Adivasis* (original inhabitants) and yet schools have been neglectful in developing and extending children's cultural expression. As a teacher, I believe, visual arts has the possibility of doing justice to children in schools by allowing them and bestowing them with possibilities to express, and share with others, their lives, their stories and imaginations, their world with all of its richness and complications. I would like to share some of the drawings made by the students of my class in which they created images of their world, emphasizing their identities, work, festivities and practices.



By Hadma Markam, Jheeram, Bastar

By Pavan Kartami, Kodrikosum, Sukma

By Dhansingh

By Pojja Vetti, Mesiras, Sukma

Pakela Haat Bazaar, by Pavan Kartami, Village Kodrikosum, Sukma

So as teachers, educators or anybody concerned with education, what should we do now? How can we fight the inequity of arts education in our country? Will children studying in our village schools ever get the access to arts education? How could we advocate arts education in a time when our country is obsessed with STEM and see it as the only marker of development? With these questions, I would like to rest my case, because I know, in the vast expanse of Sukma, somewhere, in the villages, or in the forests, children would be making art now and nothing can stop them from making it. But I do wonder, **when will children make art in the classrooms?**

References

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